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AUTHOR Williams, Sean D.
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ABSTRACT

A separation between textual production and textual consumption is not a self-evident state of being for English studies. The gap in English studies has been constructed in large part along the lines of production of texts as opposed to the consumption of texts. Several articles published in the 1980s called for a unifying theory of composition and literature, but they were more successful at clarifying the reasons why the project failed. A look at two texts, Lynn Z. Bloom's "Freshman Composition as a Middle-Class Enterprise" and Daniel T. O'Hara's "Henry James's Version of Judgment," reveals that composition and literature already recognize that all acts of reading and writing synthesize text, writer, reader, and critic into a single process. What would truly accomplish the unification of composition and literature is for scholars to produce discourse like Bloom's and O'Hara's that does it without articulating it as the object. Unity is a practice not a theory. (Contains 11 references.) (RS)

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"Notes Toward a Unified (Non)Theory of Composition and Literature"

Sean D. Williams
University of Washington
Department of English

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Notes Toward a Unified (Non)Theory of Composition and Literature[1]

> I am advocating a reintegration, or perhaps better a combination of elements that have been separated. In the normal run of the English Department course offerings there are literature courses and writing courses. What began as a difference in emphasis has become a difference of kind, and we now have specialized courses, and specialized teachers, and the students are left to assemble the pieces as best they can.
>
> --Charles Moran, 1981

It often seems that the gap in American English departments between the creative act and the interpretative act is so old that it's almost "common sense knowledge" in the English department that the division has always existed. However, a separation between textual production and textual consumption is not a self-evident state of being for English studies. Therefore, I'd like to take a step back and offer a brief account of how the disparity arose, one that is slightly different from those presented in the well-known histories of composition's development as a discipline. I'd then like to demonstrate the plausibility of my (non)theory by looking briefly at an article from the October 1996 edition of *College English* as representative of current composition scholarship as well as an article which appeared in a recent volume of *boundary 2* as representative of current literature scholarship, both of which, I assert, practice the (non)theory. What exactly I mean by "(non)theory of Composition and Literature" hopefully will become evident along the way.

[1] Adapted from the title of Patricia Bizzell's 1986 article "On the Possibility of a Unified Theory of Composition and Literature" which appeared in *Rhetoric Review* 4:2, pp. 174-181.

Constructing the Gap

Winifred Bryan Horner offers an insightful three-part outline of the historical reasons for the division in the introduction to her pioneering collection of essays titled *Composition and Literature: Bridging the Gap*.[2] She writes that the shift from the creative act to the interpretative act began in the sixteenth century when classical rhetoric had allowed itself to become a canon of stylistic techniques and a long list of figurative structures that were added to common conversation to give the appearance of refinement (3). This overemphasis on style combined with the elocutionary movement of the eighteenth century reduced rhetoric to a dramatized form of public performance and, in the same century, a new emphasis on studying English literature arose (Horner 1-13).[3] The combined result of which was the shift from an emphasis on production to the modern emphasis on consumption.

Kaufer and Young in their history of nineteenth- and twentieth- century English department attitudes toward writing reveal what amounts to a restatement of Horner's observations. They suggest that until the 1960's writing was understood either as craft or as art. In the first paradigm, writing was not associated with thinking but rather with conventions and mechanics of orderly and grammatical prose. The second paradigm treated writing as inseparable from thinking yet it could not be taught because it was an art, a "mystery" that could be discovered or uncovered but never taught (150-51).

[2] I call Horner's collection pioneering not because it is the first to make connections between language study and literature, (c.f. Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* first published in 1961, and *A Rhetoric of Irony*, 1974; Joseph Comprone's "Burke's Dramatism as a Means of Using Literature to Teach Composition," RSQ 9 (1979) 142-55; Stanley Fish's *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, 1972) but because it is the first to fully articulate the division and subsequently attempt to stitch the fabric back together.

[3] The shift is most noticeable in those who criticized it, not least of which was Jonathan Swift in his *Battle of the Books*.

My assertion that Kaufer and Young essentially restate Horner crystallizes when viewed through Wolfgang Iser's *The Act of Reading*. Iser identifies a distinction between expository writing and literary writing both of which he discusses under the heading of types of reading. When reading expository writing, Iser asserts, one favors abstract orders imposed upon mental events with the sum effect of little dissonance, by contrast, when reading literature, a reader expects the complexity of clashing images, contradiction, and enjoys the sensation on being made to feel uneasy with the ideas and experiences of others (163-231). If we reflect upon Iser's observations about the division between "expository" and "literary," between "craft" and "art", we see a rule-governed "pure-craft" developed in opposition to the "mysterious impulses" of pure art (Comprone 298). By implication then, everybody can write expository prose since it can be taught, but since literary prose cannot be taught and is composed by those with the mysterious gift, it is primarily something to be consumed or reflected upon.

From Horner to Kaufer and Young, to Iser, it's clear that the gap in English studies has been constructed in large part along the lines of production of texts as opposed to the consumption of texts and one could cite a good many scholars in addition to those I included here to support this point.

Bridging the Gap

I'd like to turn now to a more detailed discussion of the mid 1980's attempt to "bridge the gap" I just briefly outlined. As Joseph Comprone notes, during the 80's, acts of writing and reading came to be regarded as "interdependent with acts of mind, and with criticism, evaluation, analysis, and the construction of knowledge in general" (292).

Comprone's article, "Literary Theory and Composition" from 1987, offers a "simple but far-reaching" theory for uniting composition and literature along the lines of a Writing-Across the-Curriculum model. He argues for

> the reinstallation of a curriculum in which the process of interpretation provides the base from which writers in any field work. All writers and readers construct meanings from a shared set of linguistic and field-specific conventions; all writers must balance subjective and objective responses as they operate within these conventions; all writers, to some degree, construct the contexts within which they write. Perhaps literary texts as they are composed and de-composed by communities of readers and writers, using conventional strategies in often original ways, can create the kind of active critical and original writers a curriculum requires as it promotes writing across the disciplines (329).

Edward White in his 1984 "Post-Structural Literary Criticism and the Response to Student Writing" tries to bring composition and literature together in much the same way as Comprone does. Responding to texts, he writes "is the business that unites us as teachers of literature and of writing" (186). He argues that essays written for first-year composition should be read with the destabilized concept of text promoted by post-structural literary theory and its re-imagination of the reader as joining (or replacing) the writer as the creator of meaning (190). Or in White's words, composition and literature can be united in the post-structural belief that the process of reading "brings reading and writing together as parallel acts, both of them consisting of the making of meaning: the writer seeks to make meaning out of experience, while the reader seeks to make meaning out of a text" (191). A notion that critical linguist Gunther Kress has recently promoted in several publications as "productive consumption".

Although these articles call for a unifying theory of composition and literature, they are more successful at clarifying the reasons why the project failed. That is, White, like Comprone, explicitly privileges reading. Recall that White said that "responding to texts" was the primary business of English teachers and that Comprone called for a new curriculum with an emphasis on the "process of interpretation." So in a word, the call for unity was made upon promoting the consumption of texts which had the sum effect of maintaining the division between the creative act and the interpretative act. Nonetheless, these scholars and others, like Patricia Bizzell - from whose article "On the Possibility of a Unified Theory of Composition and Literature," I have taken my title - took the first steps toward building a bridge between the two by suggesting the possibility that, in fact, composition and literature could be brought together into one academic pursuit.

Erasing the Line

The optimism implied by "building a bridge", however, is deceiving: a bridge allows one to cross between two sides, but it presupposes that an otherwise intraversable boundary exists and is therefore essentially self-defeating. However, looking at two texts, one from *College English* and one from *boundary 2* reveals that, in fact, composition and literature don't need a bridge since both already recognize that all acts of reading and writing synthesize text, writer, reader and critic into a single process. I'd like, therefore, to take this identity as a guiding principle to briefly demonstrate how Lynn Z. Bloom's "Freshman Composition as a Middle-Class Enterprise," which appeared in the October 1996 volume of *College English* and how Daniel T. O'Hara's "Henry James's Version of Judgment" published in the Spring 1996 edition of *boundary 2* practice my (non)theory of composition and literature.

Bloom's main premise is to discuss how freshman composition programs are really an enterprise for promoting middle class values. But what's more striking, is that the text she is reading, freshman composition, is as much the basis of her identity as a product of herself. She writes that composition is taught "by middle-class teachers in middle-class institutions to students who are middle class either in actuality or aspiration" (656). She later adds that she, and others like her, "could scarcely have found a profession that more thoroughly allowed us to preach what we had been practicing all our lives...for all of us knew right from the start how to function as middle-class teachers" (658). That is, the text she reads is one that she writes everyday when she enters her classroom but that text is comprehensible to her only because it has essentially written her: she is simultaneously producer of and consumer of and product of the text which she now reflects upon by writing yet another text.

But Bloom's article gets even more complicated than this. Her argument is both commentary on the enterprise of freshman composition as well as an articulated commentary upon her commentary which Bloom accomplishes by including italicized narratives upon her own life that frame her argument about composition. She begins with what seems to be a complete nonsequitor (if one can begin with something already off the subject):

> *I used to go to parties in hopes of meeting new people, but now we live in a small town and everyone knows I'm an English teacher....No one ever says, "How wonderful that you are introducing my children to the discourse community to which they aspire."...Instead they say, "I guess I'd better watch my grammar." "Why, is she sick?" I have an urge to reply: A friend, also an English teacher, always tells strangers she's a nurse* (654-55).

I cite the passage because it demonstrates an undercurrent present throughout the article which foregrounds Bloom's consideration of her own writing both as subject - in the sense that it's responsible for accomplishing something - and object - in the sense that it's something to be reflected upon. Bloom's italicized commentary, then, transforms what could be a one-dimensional article on freshman composition into a room of mirrors where one circle of text, writer, reader and critic is inseparably interwoven and implicated in the creation of another that reflects what's in the other mirrors which is what itself reflects....It does not seem to matter, then, where one enters Bloom's article because it's always already equally about text, writer, reader and critic.

O'Hara's article on Henry James offers a nearly identical pattern. He opens his article, "A sentence from Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* guides my thinking: 'The "work," whether of the artist or the philosopher, invents the man who has created it, who is supposed to have created it'" (61). Admittedly, O'Hara is more verbally explicit in combining reading and writing than Bloom since his argument about "contagious appearances" relies exactly upon the reciprocity of reading and writing. However his text is equally complex because, I'm not entirely certain if O'Hara is using James to explain Nietzsche, Nietzsche to explain James, or Nietzsche and James to explain his own reflexive process of reading and writing. The confusion, though, is exactly the point because as O'Hara argues, James's notion of the contagion figure "disseminates itself among the characters and readers, so that they too become authorial."

O'Hara ends by revealing, in fact, in a manner similar to Bloom, that his commentary upon the text in question, Henry James's preface to *The Golden Bowl*, is simultaneously a commentary upon his own commentary.

> I still find it extraordinary and exhilarating, for one example, that James can speak of all these personae, masks figure, subject positions- all these disseminated selves or contagious emanations - both pleasurably and as forming "the whole chain of relation and responsibility" of society ... even as we recognize our concerns in him, [they are] precisely from us (70)

That is, O'Hara confesses, everything that he has just argued - and praised - about Henry James is equally present in his own text, since the meaning O'Hara gives to James's text is precisely from O'Hara's productive consumption of James's text. Put another way, just as Henry James uses characters in novels as subjects to reflect upon himself and his world as an object, O'Hara reflects upon himself and his world by writing himself into the same position that James occupies in relation to the characters in his novels.

The Practice of Unity

So what finally if the (non)theory of composition and literature? I'd like to read a few lines from Mark Strand's poem "The Story of our Lives" to crystallize the idea:

> We are reading the story of our lives
> as though we were in it,
> as though we had written it.
> This comes up again and again.
> In one of the chapters
> I lean back and push the book aside
> because the book says
> it is what I am doing.

I lean back and begin to write about the book.

I write that I wish to move beyond the book,

beyond my life into another life.

I put the pen down.

The book says: *He put the pen down*

and turned and watched her reading

the part about herself falling in love.

The book is more accurate than we can imagine.

These lines, were published - fortunate coincidence - in 1985, exactly at the time I claimed that the first attempts were made at unifying English studies. But the attempt remained exactly that, an attempt, an "essay" in the proper sense of the word, exactly because of its words. That is, in the mid 1980's, the framing metaphor was that of a bridge and therefore the gap between composition and literature remained in the discourse that followed from that metaphor. But if we understand that the division was due in large part to the divisive impulses of this metaphor, then, in effect, we don't need a theory of unification, we need discourse products that place the division under erasure (to use that theoretical expletive). That is, unlike what I have done in structuring this paper which focuses first on the historical and theoretical reasons for the division between composition and literature and then second on erasing it, what would truly accomplish the unification of composition and literature would be for us to produce discourse like Bloom's and O'Hara's that does it without articulating it as the object. Unity is a practice not a theory.

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